



Sober, bold and full of flavour — No apologies

The non-alcoholic drinks revolution is no longer a compromise — it's a choice. Driven by innovation in flavour, texture and sensory experience, brands like NON, Duchess and Olipop are rewriting the rules. By Dr. Hanneli van der Merwe, Synercore product and business developer.

The non-alcoholic beverage trend has expanded rapidly over the past five years, with no sign of slowing. Customers now expect sophisticated non-alcoholic options for every occasion, and most gatherings offer non-alcoholic beer, wine and mocktails. Development has centred on flavour mimicking, landing products that closely mirror their alcoholic counterparts. Beer delivers the most convincing like-for-like experience; wine is most constrained by legislation on permitted additives; mocktails have the most room to hide or elevate flavour. This article explores those flavours, and what's next.

BEERS: RECLAIMING THE PINT

The creation of zero-alcohol beers has two general directions: interfering with the biology of brewing, or de-alcoholising a finished beer. Interfering with the biology of brewing means altering the mashing regime, mostly through temperature manipulation, low-alcohol-producing micro-organisms, or arresting fermentation via rapid cooling and carbon dioxide dosing. De-alcoholising works similarly for beer and wine: vacuum distillation to lower alcohol, or the Spinning Cone to remove it completely.

"The NA shelf has become a destination, not a consolation — flavour quality and choice are defining the category."

Malt, hops and fruit notes dominate, from roasted, biscuit and caramel malt characters to piney, resinous, citrus hop notes. Fruit flavours range from citrus and stone fruit to ginger, elderflower and yuzu. Fermentation-derived flavours such as esters and phenols enhance the profile further, alongside polysaccharides, dextrins, lactose and caramel colouring for mouthfeel.

NON-ALCOHOLIC WINES

Non-alcoholic wine is made in two ways: removing alcohol from a finished wine, or making wine from grape juice from the outset, using the same de-alcoholising methods as beer. In South Africa, what can be added to these wines is governed by a list of approved additives from the International Organisation of Vine and Wine. However, this is where things start to become complicated as de-alcoholisation also removes flavour, weight,

sweetness and the characteristic "burn" along with the alcohol itself. Producers lean on tannins and mannoproteins to rebuild mouthfeel and body, and a modest amount of sugar for balance. Nothing yet fully replaces alcohol's warming, slightly bitter sensation. That constraint has pushed some producers toward a different philosophy. NON, for example, doesn't try to taste like wine at all: its range is built on tannin, salinity, acidity and a whole fruit or vegetable as the lead flavour, previewing a tension running through the category: mimic the original, or build something that stands on its own?

DID YOU KNOW?

Winemakers use Spinning Cone technology — the same method applied in conventional winemaking — to strip alcohol from finished wine. The goal: preserve as much of the original flavour profile as possible during de-alcoholisation. It's a high-tech tightrope walk between chemistry and craft, and it's one of the reasons truly convincing non-alcoholic wines remain so difficult to produce.



NON-ALCOHOLIC MOCKTAILS

Mocktails and non-alcoholic spirits have the most room to play, spanning powders, cordials, bitters, RTD cans and bottled cocktails. Matching the alcohol burn is hardest, but mocktails can use any flavour to get there. Formulators mimic heat and mild “pain” rather than taste, using capsaicin, layered spice (ginger, black pepper, Sichuan pepper) and an acid snap from citric acid or vinegar. A good spirit’s lingering finish is rebuilt through botanical distillations, bitterness (gentian, quinine, wood extracts) and glycerine.

Bartenders tend to work from a five-part framework: sweetness and body, sourness and brightness (citrus, including yuzu and blood orange), bitterness and complexity, aromatic depth and effervescence to carry it across the palate. It’s a more forgiving

medium, with no single “original” to chase, leaving more room to create something distinctive.

NEW NON-ALCOHOLIC ORIGINALS

Not every non-alcoholic drink is trying to be something else. A second, arguably more interesting story is playing out in prebiotic sodas, seltzers and functional drinks built as originals from day one, never meant to taste like beer, wine or cocktails.

Poppi and Olipop are the two international names defining the alternative soda space, with noticeably different flavour signatures despite competing head-to-head. Both use a cane or cassava syrup and stevia base, sweetened further with real fruit juice. Olipop leans botanical, with calendula, marshmallow root and *Alpinia galanga* alongside citrus, cinnamon, green tea and

Himalayan pink salt. Poppi is simpler and tangier, built around apple cider vinegar, with citric acid for tang and beta-carotene for colour. South African brands like Duchess, Mahala, Musgrave’s Inspirit and John Ross Virgin Distilled Botanicals were built from scratch, incorporating botanicals, citrus, spices and functional ingredients into drinks enjoyed neat or mixed with soda water or tonic.

Cross-cutting trends here, which apply equally to the mimicry side, include effervescence marketed as an experience, flavour fusions pairing sweet with salty or spice notes, premiumisation pulling craft sodas into soft-drink territory, and functionality (protein, probiotics, adaptogens) alongside demand for low- and no-sugar formulations (roughly 40% of consumers limit added sugar, 30% follow a low- or no-sugar diet). Citrus keeps innovating beyond lemon and lime, with kumquat, kalamansi, makrut and yuzu, now becoming more popular. Fermented beverages continue to grow, underpinned by a demand towards clean label.

TWO PHILOSOPHIES, ONE CATEGORY

The same fork in the road appears across every segment. One path is mimicry: engineering flavour, mouthfeel and even the alcohol burn to get as close as legislation and technology allow. Beer is furthest along this road, wine the most constrained, and mocktails somewhere in between. The other path is reinvention: building a genuinely new flavour identity, whether that’s NON refusing to taste like wine at all, or Poppi and Olipop inventing a category that never needed alcohol to begin with.

Neither path is winning outright. What’s clear is that flavour, not abstinence or novelty for its own sake, is driving this. The non-alcoholic shelf has stopped being the place you go when you can’t have the “real thing” and started being a category people choose into on its own merits. Whether the next wave comes from cracking the alcohol burn, or from brands giving up the chase, is the question worth watching. 🌱

DID YOU KNOW?

Not every non-alcoholic drink is trying to be something else.

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